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ABSTRACT

This article provides an account of some characteristics of the current situation of culture teaching in foreign language education. The focus is that existing approaches need to be revisited and redefined, because the superficiality characterizing the way culture is taught is not very helpful in raising learners' cultural awareness and developing their intercultural competence. It is argued that a more focused model that explores various aspects of the "How" and "Why" of the culture construct is required towards fostering understanding and acceptance of difference. Rather than aiming to attain a native-speaker-like level of competence, the essence of culture teaching should be extended to include illuminating how the world must not be viewed from a one-sided perspective. Learners need to learn to decenter and relativize their view of the world around them. This paper departs from the premise that language and culture embody and perpetuate different worldviews. The objective is to argue that one of the noble aims of culture teaching should be to develop intercultural competence that leads to empathy, openness and understanding vis-a-vis the target culture and its people. An approach to the study of language and culture that aims to explore what, how, and why culture can open a wide range of perspectives to the learner. (Contains 24 references.) (KFT)

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This article provides an account of some characteristics of the current situation of culture teaching in foreign language education. The contention here is that existing approaches need to be revisited and redefined, for the superficiality characterizing the way culture is taught is not very helpful in raising learners' cultural awareness and developing their intercultural competence. It is argued that a more focused model which explores various aspects of the *How* and *Why* of the culture construct is required towards fostering understanding and acceptance of difference. Rather than aiming to attain a native-speaker like level of competence, the essence of culture teaching should be extended to include illuminating how the world must not be viewed from a one-sided perspective. Learners need to learn to decenter and relativize their view of the world around them.

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Teaching towards cultural awareness and intercultural competence: How/Why culture means?

Introduction

Wide strides have of late been made in the field of foreign language education, which now lay claim to a more focused, more purposeful and more explicit inclusion of cultural content. The aim of foreign language teaching and learning is no longer constrained within the confines of the abstract and sterile linguistic configurations, but is rather extended to incorporate and account for features of the larger cultural fabric of which language is one part. In the foreign language class, culture can, if well invested, 'vivify language instruction' for learners (Oxford, 1994). The present article looks at culture as encompassing various aspects of shared life in a community, a view commonly adopted of the culture concept in the foreign language enterprise (Rivers, 1981).

The fundamental theme of this proposal is that studying a language must include significant learning about another culture, both implicitly and explicitly depending on local educational specificities, for the two are inseparable. Students cannot truly master language until they have also mastered the cultural context in which the language occurs. Cultural learning enables students to discover that there are multiple ways of viewing the world, which can ultimately help them to participate in a world that is increasing becoming a global village. Recently, different methods have been proposed towards accomplishing this goal, for example, the use of literature and ethnography (Byram and Fleming, 1998).

Culture in the foreign language class

It has become a truism in academia nowadays hat in teaching language one is out of necessity also teaching culture, for the former is so much part and parcel of the latter and cannot be severed from it in any way. Indeed, it may be argued that studying language without studying the culture of its native speakers is a lifeless endeavor. Hence, a simplistic, rather naïve, view maintaining that in teaching language we by definition also teach its cultural baggage falls short of credibility and simply does not hold any longer. Language cannot be stripped off its cultural background.

In foreign language education, culture has drawn a sharp line between two main types of culture: "Capital/big '**C**' culture" (the culture of literary classics and works of art) and "lowercase/small '**c**' culture" (habits, customs, traditions, folklore, lifestyles). On the grounds of the above, it has become increasingly important to recognize that teaching language without culture "can become communicatively and culturally vapid" (Oxford, 1994). As Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984) indicate:

> ... language and culture are no longer just 'going steady'; they are truly engaged. Marriage has not taken place yet, though .....
>
> (Crawford-Lange and Lange, 1984: 144)

This may possibly justify the quest for a theory of culture learning which takes account of the cognitive and moral development of learners (Byram *et al.*, 1994). To the extent that this should constitute one fundamental aim of language teaching it has to be admitted that the challenges imposed on teachers and students alike are tremendous, but malleable, however.

The implications of the theory which Byram and his colleagues (*ibid.*) lay claim to may in this sense be regarded of too large a scope. The theory the authors strive for comprises too wide a range of disciplines such as literature, history, geography, education, anthropology and linguistics, etc., and to this effect it may be argued that this would be a lifelong process that is beyond the reach of both teachers and learners.

It has to be borne in mind, however, that the need in culture teaching arises for more than mere imparting of knowledge: culture must now be taught implicitly and explicitly. In this sense, it has now become a necessity to shed light and highlight three crucial elements:

- To raise awareness of one's identity and of the existence of difference
- To enhance understanding of self and others
- To foster appreciation of 'otherness' (Byram, 1989)

In this respect, while strenuous demands in language learning are placed on the process of language learning, cultural awareness still remains largely unexplored. The truth of the matter is that

> There is more to the successful exchange of forms and structures and even their appropriate use
>
> (Kramsch, 1992: 217)

The cultural dimension is at times taken for granted and has to be emphasized. Caution

must therefore be taken that culture learning should not be viewed as skill-learning where there is a risk that culture might be regarded as a fifth skill along the lines of the four linguistic skills, productive (speaking & writing) and receptive (listening & reading). Rather, on the basis of studies undertaken by Damen (1987), Kramsch (1993) and Byram (1997a, 1997b), it is a more integrated exercise, part of which is skill and part of which is knowledge.

The current state of affairs in language teaching and learning is that culture is only attributed a second-class status, for this dimension is still largely confined to the periphery of the language classroom. For as Nostrand (1991) comments,

> When the acquisition and dissemination of elements of cultural *information* become the predominant teaching strategy, though, severe limitations are imposed on the teaching of culture.
>
> (Nostrand, 1991: 139)

A hazardous implication of such an information-centered and fact-finding approach to culture teaching is that the culture under study is taken to mean a 'closed, final and complete' construct (Crawford-Lange and Lange 1984: 141), which clashes with the truism that culture is constantly changing and variable. The goals of teaching culture in the foreign language class should therefore move beyond cultural tidbits characteristic of an information-only strategy, what Kramsch (1990) refers to as 'cultural trivia'; it should instead "transcend this ... to more pertinent and more significant goals of cultural understanding, relativism, decentring" (p. 87).

Recently, arguments have been voiced in some corners asking for the need to move to a

more focused approach to culture teaching. The basic premise of these arguments is that "Culture is incorporated only to the extent that it reinforces and enriches, not that it puts in question, traditional boundaries of self and other. In practice teachers teach language and culture or culture in language, but not language as culture" (Kramsch, 1995: 83). Similarly, Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984) state that culture teaching is still in its embryo stage, "in the process of becoming" (p. 142), and argue that culture should be taught as a process. As they put it, "To study culture as a body of facts is to study the characteristics of culture; to study culture as a process is to study its essence" (*ibid.*).

Intercultural competence

With the realization that more and more emphasis is being placed on the learner as the locus of the teaching and learning enterprise, particularly as the learner-centered approach has become the vogue of the time, intercultural competence has become the target of foreign language teaching. In order to cater for the needs of the foreign language learner, new dimensions are now defined and refined with respect to the methods, approaches, aims and objectives employed in the language classroom. This has marked a move towards a new 'intercultural wave' (Jæger, 1995: 34) which has displaced the exclusive reliance on linguistic/grammatical competence of the 1970s and has further developed and compensated for the concept of communicative competence of the late 1980s.

Intercultural competence, 'the new magic word' (Serçu, 1995: 117) has recently become the objective of foreign language learning. In the words of Meyer (1991) and Jensen (1995), intercultural competence entails the individual's ability to behave in an adequate manner that abides by the norms and expectations of the target culture. According to

Jensen (1995), intercultural competence

> comprises the ability to behave appropriately in intercultural situations, the affective and cognitive capacity to establish and maintain intercultural relationships and the ability to stabilize one's self-identity while mediating between cultures
>
> (Jensen, 1995: 41)

Meyer (1991) draws a distinction between three levels of intercultural competence echoed here in terms of levels of positioning:

1. Intra-cultural (monocultural level) where the learner positions him/herself inside his/her own culture and views the world from within it;
2. Inter-cultural (intercultural level) where the learner positions him/herself between his/her own culture (C1) and the target one (C2) and experiences the world from the perspectives of the two;
1. Supra-cultural (transcultural level) where the learner positions him/herself above the two cultures (C1 & C2).

A more updated version of the intercultural competence approach is offered by Byram (1997a, 1997b) and encompasses five 'savoirs':

- Savoirs: acquisition of knowledge
- Savoir-apprendre/faire: skills of discovery and interaction
- Savoir-être: attitudes and values (relativizing self and valuing other)

- Savoir-comprendre: skills of interpreting and relating
- Savoir-s'engager: critical cultural awareness

It is in this regard that *learning about* has to be redirected towards a more concerted hands-on experience types of approach to the target language community and its way of life. The role of culture learning in the foreign language classroom will hence need to be redefined as an attempt where reducing and diminishing stereotypes and generalized bias is in focus.

In lieu of teaching language and culture, the need arises for the teaching of language-and-culture (Nostrand, 1988, p. 33; Byram *et al.*, 1994; Kramsch, 1993) whereby the two are intimately integrated. A relevant model of culture teaching is required to stress and reflect a skills-based approach since a crucial component of intercultural competence entails knowledge of and ability to enact appropriate behavior skills. This is particularly the case in contexts where the learner involved is physically and psychologically distant from members of the target language community. Learners need to be familiarized with different aspects of life from the native speaker's perspective, an essential part of which rests with these skills. It is also necessary to lay emphasis on the implications and meanings of cultural information (Kramsch, 1993; Nostrand, 1989). To be able to do this requires a shift away from teaching *what* culture is through teaching *how* culture is to *why* culture is. Hence, culture teaching needs to highlight the legitimacy of three different perspectives in increasing order of priority:

- *What* culture is or means: this perspective aims to define and identify cultural phenomena

- *How* culture is or means: this approach stresses explanation and analysis of cultural phenomena and cultural meanings
- *Why* culture is or means which strives for creative critical thinking. This approach capitalizes on the learner's ability to relativise his and the other culture and to adopt multiple perspectives.

This model (Figure 1 below) is represented in terms of movements from stage one, through the second stage to the third and last. The first is an initial and primary stage, which can be introduced at a beginner level. Here learners get to *know about* the target culture and accumulate factual knowledge. This leads to the second stage which is a deeper level of study suitable for intermediate levels. Here learners start to probe cultural elements and view them from a comparative standpoint which relates to both their native culture and the target. Attempts at understanding, empathy, appreciation and acceptance of the other are still in their embryo stage. The third is the ideal and may be adopted at advanced levels of study. At this stage, learners experience the target culture in depth and understanding, empathy, appreciation and acceptance are under way towards fully-fledged accomplishment.

Figure 1: An integrative model of culture teaching towards cultural awareness and intercultural competence

3. Culture WHY

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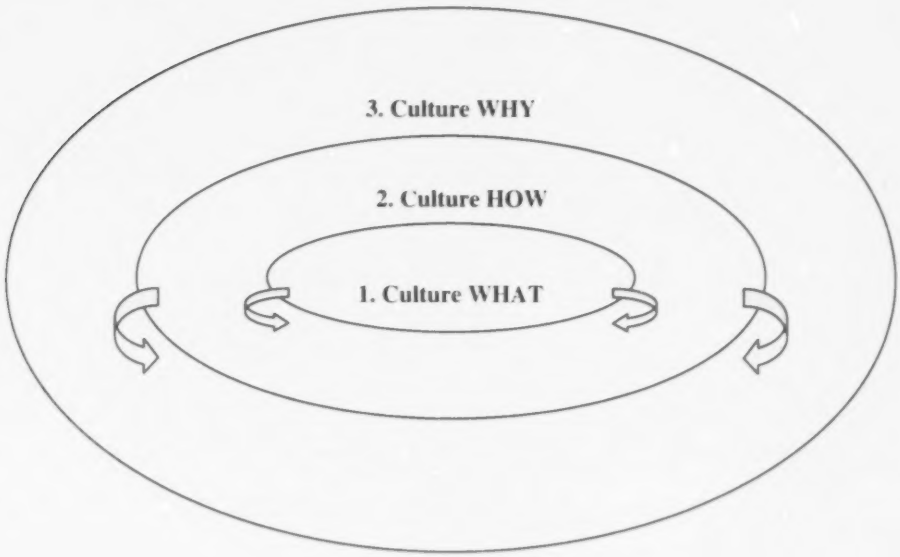
Figure 1: An integrative model of culture teaching towards cultural awareness and intercultural competence



2. Culture HOW

1. Culture WHAT

A lucrative way of attaining such an aim may be through a skill-oriented model which reflects integration of various aspects of intercultural competence. As is pointed out by Fiske (1989),

> Culture is not a relatively harmonious and stable pool of significations, but a confrontation between groups occupying different, sometimes opposing, positions in the map of social relations, and the process of making meanings (which is, after all, the process of culture) is a social struggle, as different groups struggle to establish meanings that serve interests.
>
> (Fiske, 1989: 58)

Language teaching has traditionally established the native speaker as a norm for authentic language use (Kramsch, 1998). As Davies (1991) comments, the native speaker is a concept characterizing people who have an

> insider knowledge about 'their' language. They are the models we appeal to for the 'truth' about the language, they know what the language is ... and what the language isn't ... They are the stake-holders of the language, they control its maintenance and shape its direction
>
> (Davies, 1991: 1)

A very central problem area for culture teaching is the complexity of the issue of assessing intercultural competence modeled on native speakership. This is mainly due to the fact that in assessing competence the language learner is judged by criteria that are in the possession of native speakers, i.e. people whom learners can hardly strive to become. Cook (1995) argues that it is a fallacy to define someone's competence in terms of appropriateness or adequacy, because the criterion of measurement used here is something which the learner does not and cannot possess. Therefore, foreign language learners should be treated as *foreign language learners* in their own right, rather than *imitators* of the native speaker norm. One can only be a native speaker of one's own language and a member of one's own culture. Now that a large amount of emphasis is being laid on the development of such a competence, one has to be cautious as to what kind of assessment procedures to utilize when assessing the learner's intercultural competence. Further research is required to shed more light on ways and means of catering for the assessment criteria to be used.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to examine and revisit some important issues espoused in culture

teaching. The paper departs from the premise that language and culture embody and perpetuate different world-views. The objective here is to argue that one of the noble aims of culture teaching should be to develop an intercultural competence that leads to empathy, openness and understanding vis-à-vis the target culture and its people. An approach to the study of language-and-culture which aims to explore *what*, *how* and *why* is culture can open a wide range of perspectives to the learner.

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